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SOCIAL MEDIA – A NEW ERA OF COMMUNICATION

This article describes social media as a new era of interpersonal communication. The study's main objective is to distinguish between the specific features through which social media is creating interesting channels of information transmission. The functioning of the newly defined information society is also analysed, citing the changes that social media underwent as a good starting point for this analysis. When the speed of information transfer and the general availability became insufficient for the needs, there were expectations of deeper connections between the users and the content than had existed prior to social media. A social media user is not only a recipient, but also an active creator who influences deeply the essence and functioning of social media.

Keywords: Social media, user, the Internet, web platforms, Facebook, Instagram, messages, information, entertainment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The times of ubiquitous social media show how it is important for organizations not to forget about the possibilities relating to communication with the recipients due to social media. To fully understand the mechanisms influencing the behaviors, one needs to refer to the characteristics and the mechanisms, due to which they became so popular in the world. Social media are an inseparable part of peoples' lifestyles who have an unlimited access to the Internet resources. They are an ideal place for promotion of goods, services and events, as well as for communication between portal customers. Social media can be considered as content marketing tool. It is a strategic approach that focuses on content creation and distribution, the aim of which is to attract a large group of recipients to make profit in various forms and meanings. As a rule, social media fulfil two main functions – communication and marketing, which are interpenetrated and can be used by individuals and organizations. The above functions and mechanisms relating to them are discussed in this article.

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2. SOCIAL MEDIA – A NEW ERA OF COMMUNICATION

Information in the global world is one of the main tools necessary for functioning of an individual, community, enterprise or organization. According to Alvin and Heidi Toffler, there is a dominant intellectual paradigm today, and this period can be called information civilization. Mikula states that

the condition for the third wave of civilization to emerge is a highly intellectualized economy with flat direct connections, with direct access to knowledge and information, which become a substitute for most means of production, energy, raw materials, human labor and capital (Diec, 2015).

The term „information society” was mentioned for the first time by Tadao Umesamo in 1963, but it was only a revolution in technological information that contributed to the rise in importance to prices of goods. The Internet has „become a fabric of life” (Diec, 2015). For modern organizations, as well as for economy, the environment is characterized by conditions that generate very high volatility, lack of continuity, uncertainty, and very frequent lack of specific standards, which contribute to the fact that the decision-making processes are difficult and have high risks (Diec, 2015).

To better understand the characteristics of social media in general, it is worth referring to the history. In the initial stage, social media were created for entertainment and in order to facilitate communication between people. These functions have been significantly enriched and expanded in the course of time. In addition to their primary functions, social media also perform informational, educational and social functions; they are political and marketing tools, and are also used by non-governmental organizations, small enterprises and uniformed services. On the one hand, proper use of social media enriches greatly the cognitive process, but on the other hand, the information is not always reliable and true, hence it can mislead easily or affect negatively the quality of the recipient knowledge (Garwol, 2017).

Though it is hard to believe the first social media appeared approximately in 1978. They differed from information channels nowadays, but they laid the foundations for the development of opportunities for users to share information on the web. The first program is CBBS – Chicago Bulletin Board Systems, a program that brings together enthusiasts of technology and computers. It worked in such a way that one had to call via an analog telephone network. In the course of time, there were much more attempts to connect computers into a social network, including Usenet, LISTSRV or EIES which formed the Electronic Information Exchange System (Kilen, 2022)

Social media have undergone multiple changes with the time, collapsed, evolved or built the position and strengthened it. Nowadays communication looks completely different in comparison to interpersonal communication which was used until recently, there is an open space where people discuss openly and share their opinions, observations, views or information from their private lives. In 1995, a social network service called classmates.com was created which is one of the most popular social network and a model for the national website called nasza-klasa.pl. In 1997, the American portal SixDegrees.com was founded, the aim of which was to find friends and send them an invitation. The translation of the above website into Polish meant six degrees and referred to the theory that we are separated from any stranger in the world by up to 6 other acquaintances. Although the website existed

only 4 years, it created a solid foundation for the giants of social media of the 21st century (Kilen, 2022)

Facebook is the largest social media site in the world. It was founded in 2004 by a group of students from Harvard University. When first launched, only Harvard University students were eligible members of social network. However, with time, membership was extended to other universities and schools due to the network success. At that time, Facebook users could post photographs of themselves and personal information about their lives, as well as share the above information with other users. In the course of time, the portal was gaining more and more popularity, not only in the USA, but all over the world. There were an estimated over a billion social media users with many language versions at the end of 2012. The Polish variant was created in 2008 (Zalewska-Bochenko, 2016).

Facebook nowadays differs from its original version. Today, it is not only a simple presentation of the profile holder and a general place to express one's beliefs or share information with other users.

The main tools currently offered by Facebook include:

- the ability to post photos, links, comments, etc.,
- internal communication that also enables video calls,
- the ability to create, place and share web applications with others, due to internal platform and programming,
- fanpage – a special type of website intended for companies, institutions, public figures,
- the ability to create groups, events and join them,
- the access and notifications from friends' profiles or favorite sites,
- Facebook Connect is a single sign-on application which allows users to log on to the third party websites, application or devices using their Facebook identity,
- electronic mailbox,
- online advertising with the CPC system, also known as cost per click, which allows you to precisely define the geographical range together with the target group,
- website administrators' access to a wide range of statistics related to fanpages (e.g. the number of tags, active users, post views, etc.),
- timeline, that is, the user's profile in the form of entries on the timeline,
- support in mobile technologies for the use of the website in the form of application on devices with mobile operating systems, as well as optimization of these websites (Zalewska-Bochenko, 2016).

Instagram is another social media used by millions of people all over the world. It is the latest social media platform among the prominent social networking sites. At the same time, it is also the platform with the greatest potential, both in terms of communication and information. It is Instagram which communication technique dominates over other techniques that are similar in operation. This potential resulted from a well-thought-out strategy that assumes skillful use and appropriate stimulation of the users' tendency to simple image communication, that is, to exchange universal information on two levels: emotional and cognitive. In short, the point is that when communicating with an image, there are no difficulties in its reception, as is the case, for example, when communicating in a specific foreign language (Babecki, Żyliński, 2018).

Instagram is a medium in which one of its essential features is ludic character. The dominant form of communication is the visual form as a static image – it is the form due to

which the functioning of Instagram as a social medium has started. The image itself, as it was already mentioned, is easier to be accepted and it is more crude in comparison to the form of verbal communication. Researchers indicate that „the visual dimension of communication itself is not new. The intense presence of the image is new” (Łozowska, 2018).

Social media, which were used for interaction for a certain period of time, faced the challenge of launching the channels that would suit the institutionalized or commercialized broadcasters. It soon turned out that the presence of institutionalized broadcasters in social media is an expression of necessity, not a tendency. In view of transformations that are visible in Web 2.0 technology, such presence in the case of institutionalized senders consists primarily in the use of another available communication channel for creation of broadcast messages. Those who have been associated only with traditional media: press, radio and television, use now tools that are available in digital media. This situation provides an opportunity to become a multimedia broadcaster. A traditional media user, who is at the same time a network user has the possibility to reach the content corresponding to that contained in the message via the traditional media. Such an expansion of the knowledge base for the recipient is not possible when the recipient uses only traditional media (Łozowska, 2018).

It seems that sometimes it is very difficult to give image informative meanings. Moreover, such visual messages are considered to replace the word. Piotr Sztompka described it very precisely stating that „it is said even about three successive historical epochs distinguished due to the dominant feature of culture: the oral, verbal and visual epoch” (Łozowska, 2018). Sztompka emphasized that the image in interpersonal communication seems to assume a completely superior function over the written word. On the other hand, it should be remembered that such social media as Instagram is not a place where all users look for reliable information every day, not for entertainment. Informative messages have been accepted on Facebook very well, while the aforementioned Instagram is no longer a good place for such activities because of prevailing non-verbal communication between users. In addition, the main tasks of Instagram are aestheticization and the aforementioned entertainment, but not strictly informative content (Łozowska, 2018).

It should be remembered that although the number of fixed images on the network is constantly growing, the “word and image which are well co-present can perform independent and complementary functions; the image does not replace the word so much, as it can perform today both specific representational functions and functions that were once assigned only to the word” (Łozowska, 2018). Summarizing the abovementioned, Natalia Pater-Ejgierd stated that „today’s images are combined with words so often that they seem to create a visual-verbal language, which is completely a new communication phenomenon” (Łozowska, 2018).

Social networks have provided consumers with opportunities they have never had before. The speed of information transfer and the prospects of cooperation with other users gave the opportunity to take actions that would even more effectively affect the image of the organization that runs the account on the website. It goes here about the positive and negative aspects. The consumers began to demand from the organization much deeper relations than before, constant contact, as well as direct and honest communication. Social media have shown that in this case different communications and a new type of engagement

are forced. The Internet works continuously in real time, hence the users get a new type of experience and information is filled with emotions (Diec, 2015).

„Social media platforms are multimedia nowadays, as they contain photos, videos, hashtags, emoticons and written text,” (Łozowska, 2018) says Uta Russmann and Jakob Svensson. The initial function of Instagram as a social platform was to present photos and exchange them. Due to the fact that the portal was focused mainly on amateurs, who were not professional photographers, it was concluded to post the photos which were not professional ones. Instagram encouraged users to show non-professional images which in most cases exposed their private life. The language used in the new media also posed new challenges. Multimedia is a huge challenge for content broadcasters as they should maintain a simplified form, synthesize media information in each case (Łozowska, 2018).

A contemporary user of social media is the creator of web content himself/herself and can disseminate it on many platforms. In this way, an individual becomes a participant of communication processes in virtual communities, that form a comparable level to the real world relationships. Social media consider activities which task is to organize the life of an individual, social groups, institutions, which are often very important for them. The distinctive features of social media include:

- using them on any scale: private, local, national, international or global,
- general availability for all interested persons,
- endless possibilities of modification,
- free access to content – its reception and creation,
- implementation on social participation,
- final information results from direct group influence,
- lack of coordination between top-down creators,
- highly available and distributed content,
- time of content publication is limited to the necessary minimum,
- the content arises in the natural way (Bielawski, Ziółkowska, 2018).

The main feature of social media is undoubtedly its dialogical nature. According to the type of intercast communication or co-communication, there is an immediate feedback. A high level of interaction between the sender and receiver is also observed. In addition, social media are multimedia and polyphonic influencing several different senses at the same time. This is possible due to the fact that the published content includes texts, images, animations or videos. Engagement of users, stimulation of their activities to interact or participate in discussions are not the only actions in social media (Bielawski, Ziółkowska, 2018).

Social media can be easily distinguished from other media due to a number of features, which are the following ones:

- media reach – social media give the possibility to reach a wide range of users,
- access – social media are characterized by universal access to numerous recipients free of charge or for a small fee,
- use – social media allow to create the content without having any special skills, but using new technologies,
- immediacy – it is a space with immediate reactions,
- impermanence – social media information can be edited and changed immediately after publication, it can be edited, commented on or deleted (it can be usually deleted only by the author or portal administrator) (Bielawski, Ziółkowska, 2018).

There are several main functions of social media. First, their main function is to publish the opinions and views of the users. This basic function enables all interested parties to express their views and opinions openly and freely. This is the feature that allows freely to create and receive content. Some of the oldest and most popular forms of social media are blogs, wiki (creating and changing content from a web browser, e.g. knowledge base) and social journalism websites.

In addition, the resource sharing function can be also distinguished. This idea is based on the Web 2.0 and its task is to share all user resources, such as images, videos, photos, applications, and presentations in the network. The sharing process is due to network servers where files are stored and shared. In comparison to the aforementioned wiki model (that is, co-authoring from the web browser), solutions based on sharing are not oriented to creation, but rather to cloud data storage and cloud processing. YouTube or Slideshare are the examples of the above activities (Bielawski, Ziółkowska, 2018).

Taking into account the above, it must be noted that one of the functions of social media is focusing on co-creation or collaboration. This function aims at obtaining the result of the participant' cooperation. It is different from blogs, for example, which do not assume user participation in the content; this is the case with MMO games, that is, multiplayer. Characteristic feature of solutions in this category is the formation of ad hoc community. They are usually formed for a short time and form closed groups – the community within the group does not allow for new users or allows it occasionally.

Among the characteristic functions of social media one should also note building and maintaining relationships. This function is widely used by social media, as it is the most accessible one. It mainly refers to social networking websites, which mainly include building and maintaining relationships between people. It is also the category that strongly implements one of five main assumptions for Web 2.0, that is, connecting people via the Internet. The main task of social media is not to create content, but to build relationships. This category includes something that is forgotten – virtual world.

In addition, there are other functions focused on communication and discussion – that is the case when the axis of social interaction are discussions and debates that can take place even in isolation from the content that was originally the subject of discussion. This is the oldest category available on the web. This category included previously very popular forums, chats and instant messengers which are now experiencing a great return, as they are integrated with other types of websites, mostly with social networking. In other case, they are used simultaneously, a live chat can serve as an example. The last function focuses on current information and refers to news on current events. The solutions based on this functionality are focused on current events, and the main examples of this category include the formerly popular microblogs and alert services which are popular nowadays (e.g. citizen notifications), livestream and livecast services.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Internet growth has brought countless benefits for humans. One of benefits is creation and dissemination of social media. They constitute a communication channel on the web and can take various forms: virtual worlds, blogs, content communities or social networks. All of them are available to each of the network users. It is the ubiquitous possibility of communication that has allowed for a diametrical change in the way it runs.

In order to follow the world today which is subject to these trends, one should note that the whole world is available to everyone at one's fingertips, due to the phone or computer.

Despite these positive factors, it is worth considering the dangers connected with digital access to the Internet. It often happens that due to substitution of the real world by the virtual reality, you can come across the false or unverified information which can lead to disorganization and chaos. Many people seem do not pay attention to the above negative aspects and focus on some opportunities, which allow to build relationships, look for a way to amuse themselves and obtain information. The attempts to explain the above phenomenon and its mechanisms will require completion of actions in the future. Nevertheless, the Internet is infinite, the new functional features of social media will certainly appear.

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